

Reaching for the Stars

Sometimes what seems like failure is actually an opportunity which should be taken advantage of and then things sort of work out."

That's not the usual "achiever's success formula" that one would expect from an astronaut. But it's the message Sunita Williams brought to young people across India from September 20 to October 7.

As she traveled from Gujarat to Hyderabad, New Delhi and Mumbai, Williams was sometimes greeted like a rock star, royalty and a heroine all rolled into one. Yet, her message to enthralled youngsters was down to earth: she was *not* the brightest in her class, did *not* find college easy, was *not* always sure of her direction in life and did *not* always get the jobs she wanted.

But she made the best of whatever opportunities came her way. And here she is now, in the history books as the woman who holds records for the longest spaceflight, 195 days, and the most hours outside a spacecraft, 29 hours and 17 minutes.

Although she has had incredible experiences of floating in space and viewing the earth and the stars from a perspective few have known, Williams engaged her young audiences by reciting the small failures and unexpected turns of her life. And

she goaded them to "step out and try something new."

She liked animals and wanted to be a veterinarian. Well, she has a pet dog now, but no medical degree. She didn't want to cut her hair to join the U.S. Naval Academy, but she was afraid to live in New York City, where she had been accepted at Columbia University for veterinary studies. So, she cut her hair. She had perfect eyesight and wanted to join the Navy diving program. Whoops! Someone else did better on the tests. Only the top of the class got to be jet pilots, so she learned to fly helicopters. What do you know? Helicopter pilots were exactly what NASA was looking for by the time she applied to be an astronaut.

And once she became a NASA flight engineer aboard Expeditions 14 and 15 to the International Space Station, Williams, 42, said, it was "tough...learning to live in space." *Not* easy.

Far from being a downer, Williams' message was inspirational, to the over-achievers as well as the ordinary folks in her audiences. "Life is going to give you a lot of opportunities. Don't turn your back on them," she said, looking into their bright, eager faces. "I want to see you on the moon."

— L.K.L.

Sunita Williams greets a young fan before a lecture to students at the Indian Institute of Technology in Mumbai.



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